

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Transcontinental Railroad Simulation

Historical Setting:

Soon after the lines joined, they were extended in the west to San Francisco and in the east across the Missouri River to tracks which linked the railroad to all the others in the eastern United States. Originally, the plan was to finish the railroad in ten years. Incredibly, the job got done in six.

Nearly everything done on the transcontinental railroad was done by hand. Dirt excavated for cuts through ridges was removed one handheld cart at a time. Some of the gaps that needed to be filled were more than a quarter of a mile long and hundreds of feet high. All of the rubble to fill the gaps had to be hauled in and dumped there by hand. Black powder and nitroglycerin were used to blast tunnels; after handheld drills had been sledge hammered into the rock to open holes deep enough to pack the explosives into. All the work of grading and laying ties and spiking down the thirty-foot long rails weighing 560 pounds each, was backbreaking. It is not efficient for a railroad to travel on a steep track, so gradients of no more than 116 feet of rise per mile had to be prepared along the whole route.

The transcontinental railroad cut the travel time from New York to California from months to one week. It cut the cost of the trip from more than \$1000 per person to about \$100 per person. The United States government gave the railroad companies a square mile of land for each mile length of track built, and loaned the companies money to pay for much of the construction. It was a good investment for the United States. Even before the railroad was completed, in 1867 the US government saved about two million dollars using the railroad (at less than 10 cents per ton per mile) to send supplies to its troops on the Great Plains, rather than hauling the freight at 40 or 50 cents per ton per mile by wagon.

The land alongside the railroad track, half of it still owned by the United States government, greatly increased in value. The settlers who built and moved into towns along the railroad track helped to stabilize the US government's control over the Great Plains. The western territories soon became populated enough to be added to the country as states.

All the details in the stories provided below under Railroad Voices, are true. The names in quotation marks are invented. All other names are real individuals.

Hypothetical Situation:

Each of you will be decision-makers in this simulation. You will speak for your character, and then use your own personal best judgment to vote on the simulation outcome.

It is May 9, 1869, and you are at Promontory Summit, Utah. You are getting ready for **tomorrow's big event – the official completion of the first transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869**. You and the other characters in this simulation have gathered together because you have heard that the newspaper reporters will be restricted in their news coverage to only 500 words per article. You are concerned that your important contribution to the building of the first transcontinental railroad will be overlooked by history unless the news media covers it properly while you are here to tell the tale.

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It is your job to tell the story of your important contribution to the construction of the transcontinental railroad, and to evaluate the contributions of all those who speak, including yourself. You will be educating all the listeners about your character and the facts surrounding him/her. Find a way to include all the information in your identity description. Afterwards, you will vote nine times (but you may vote for yourself only once). You will determine which five characters contributed the most to the building of the railroad. In addition, you will identify which student you thought was most In Character, was the Most Convincing Storyteller, was the Best Questioner, and was the Best Responder to Questions. Each of the top vote-getters will receive a Golden Spike Award.

Newspaper reporter option: The reporter has been informed that he may pose the people at the ceremony for the official photographs. In addition, the telegraph operators have informed the reporter that he may use the telegraph wires to submit a story of no more than 500 words to his New York (or San Francisco – pick one) office. From this story, people in New York (or San Francisco) will learn about the event. The story will record officially, for all the world, the history of this important event.

As soon as the official photographer/reporter was announced, he started being besieged by people who want him to emphasize the part they played in getting the railroad built. He has agreed to listen to everyone, as they debate who should get the most credit when the reporter writes the story.

Your Written Assignments:

Everyone – Take notes on the contributions of each person and group involved in building the first transcontinental railroad. You will get a notetaking chart in class. After the speeches and the follow-up question/debate period, **vote on your ballot**.

Railroad Voices – You will prepare a **two-page statement** (one page typed) describing why your contribution to getting the railroad built should be the main focus of the reporter's story. Educate your listeners about your contributions, using specific details. Use all the facts in your identity description. **Use your own words** and make your contributions into a story that is so interesting you will capture the imagination of the listeners. You may attack other groups' contributions if you wish, but above all, emphasize your own contributions.

Reporter/photographers – You will listen to all the sides in the discussion, and gather the information to write **an article of no more than 500 words**, telling your readers about the construction and completion of the first transcontinental railroad. In your article emphasize the people/groups you think deserve the most credit for getting the railroad built, and give specific information about their contributions. **You must pick no more than five individuals or groups to credit and discuss in detail**. Give your article a catchy headline and put the most important facts in the first paragraph. Then, once you have the reader's attention, go on to develop the details of the story you are telling.)

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Extend the lesson:

1. You may add a drawing showing how the people in your official photograph will be posed to communicate the meaning of the event. Keep details of clothing and equipment historically accurate!
2. You may make a poster advertising the railroad and its attractive features (cost, speed & convenience compared to other ways of crossing the continent). Keep details historically accurate!
3. You may write a statement for another role in the simulation besides the one you played yourself.
4. Plan a program of events for a ceremony to celebrate the completion of the building of the transcontinental railroad. List the events in the order in which they should occur, and tell who should be doing what. Add a sentence after each event explaining why you included it in the program, and how it expresses the meaning of the event. You may make it an ornamental program, a memento of the occasion for people who attend.

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Leland Stanford, speaking for the “Big Four”, who are Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, & Charles Crocker (who also serves as chief engineer for the building of the Central Pacific RR).

You are the Governor of California, and one of the four owners of the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR). You and the other three owners have sunk your entire personal fortunes into getting the railroad built. In addition, Charlie Crocker has given every waking minute for the past six years to building this railroad, and has coordinated every step of its construction.

Even with the land grants and money loans contributed by the United States government, you four still had to spend every penny you could raise and borrow to get the railroad built. It was a huge gamble, which you hope will pay off in big profits once the railroad is running. You owe a vast amount of money for the expenses you've incurred: workers' wages, locomotives, train cars, rails, spikes, tools, millions of dollars' worth of explosives, everything it took to build the railroad. Your reasons for building this railroad are the desire for profit and fame, and the belief that the railroad is necessary to grow California's economy and connect California with the rest of the United States. Already, the railroad is paying off, and is starting to earn you hundreds of thousands of dollars per year.

Californians will be able to distribute farm products, wine, lumber and minerals (including gold) to the rest of the country more cheaply by rail. Travelers and settlers will be able to move across the country easily and quickly. Trade with Asian countries will enter through California ports and be distributed across the United States by rail. The US Postal service will be able to distribute mail cheaply and quickly by rail. Mail order companies like

Sears & Roebuck Company will be able to send out catalogues and deliver the orders. Even entire houses will be deliverable in kit form. Towns are already springing up along the route of the railroad. The railroad is civilizing and settling the interior of the continent, and drawing the nation together as nothing else could have done.

You Big Four claim you have made this all possible. Without your leadership and investment, the railroad would not have been built.

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James Harvey Strobridge, head of construction for the Central Pacific, and his wife Hanna Maria and six children

James Strobridge, you are the person who, at the urging of Charlie Crocker, decided to try hiring the Chinese workers who became the main workforce for the Central Pacific Railroad. You hired Irish crew bosses to supervise the Chinese crews, who did the most dangerous work. You rule the work crews with an iron hand. You curse the men and lose your temper easily. You are 40 years old, over six feet tall, agile and energetic. You lost an eye in a black-powder explosion, and your Chinese workers have nicknamed you the “One-Eyed Bossy Man”. When your workers get into a fight, you wade in with an axe handle to confront the ringleaders, and the fight quickly stops. Your workers respect you, and fear you, and work very hard for you. Even with one eye, you see everything that is going on.

In terms of organizing the supplies and the construction across the open spaces of Nevada and Utah, you face the same challenges as the Casement brothers (see below) working to build the Union Pacific. Going through the Sierra Nevada in California, your crew had to blast their way through granite at the rate of about ten inches per day, and build huge trestle bridges across gorges. Your supplies of rails and spikes cost far more than for the Union Pacific, because they had to be brought by ship around Cape Horn (the southern tip of South America) to California, and then brought by rail to the end of the track. You constantly worried about problems of supply, and had to depend on the uncertainties of ocean shipping to get much of what you needed. Fortunately, you had Charlie Crocker working closely with you to get you the supplies and money you needed to pay your workers.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Hanna Maria Strobridge, you have one of the most interesting stories on the railroad. For the past six years, you have been living in a three-room railroad car, a house on wheels, with your husband and your six adopted children, as the railroad is being built. You are practically the only wife and children around as the crews build the CPRR. Your tough and capable husband is getting the job done, and you are with him on this great adventure. You have a canary in a cage, and a small porch built onto the right side of your railroad car home, with an awning over the top. When your house on wheels is not moving, you hang the canary and houseplants near the door. Before people come into your home, they wipe their feet. The other workers envy your husband, because he has you with him, and has a home life nearby. All the rest of the workers are far from their loved ones.

You have seen the Chinese workers blast their way through the Sierra Nevada, hanging from the cliff sides in baskets as they drill holes, fill them with black powder and yell to be hauled out of the way quickly before the explosion. You have seen twenty feet of snow fall in one storm, and snow slides that buried groups of workers, freezing them in standing death until spring melted their bodies free. You have watched workers build wooden trestles across gorges more than a hundred feet deep. You are a loyal and courageous companion. Your husband's leadership and management have been vital to getting the railroad built. You have helped keep him healthy and happy and hard at work. Your own experiences make a fascinating story, and should be told to the world.

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Ulysses S. Grant, speaking for United States Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson and himself

The United States government should above all get the credit for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. If it had not been for the commitment and support of each of you presidents, and the Congress, the project could never have begun. No private organization could have raised the funds or obtained the land by itself. Only the US government was able to obtain the land through treaties with Native Americans, and extend millions of dollars in low-interest loans (at 6% interest) to aid in the railroad construction. Only the United States Army had the force to protect the construction crews.

For construction over flat land, the US government issued bonds at \$16,000 per mile, (\$32,000 per mile for foothills, and \$48,000 per mile for mountainous terrain), and forty miles had to be built before each new issue of bonds. The government loaned a vast amount of money to build the 2000 miles of transcontinental railroad.

It was only after the Civil War began, that Congress could agree to build the railroad. Before the war, neither the North nor the South would agree to build a railroad along a route that might extend the spread of slavery into the West, or not extend it. Once the war began, Congress was controlled by the Union. Abraham Lincoln urged Congress to pass a law granting land and loans for the building of the railroad. Each president for the past ten years has supported the building of the railroad. The railroad will bind the nation together, it will speed communication, trade and travel. It is good for the country, and the government of the whole country should get the credit for the existence of the railroad. The people of the whole country will benefit from the railroad, and it was built for them.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Thomas “Doc” Durant, speaking for the many investors in the Union Pacific Railroad

You did whatever it took to get the money and apply the political pressure to build the Union Pacific Railroad. You are a wheeler and dealer, a person of vision and remarkable powers of persuasion. You know every

important person in Washington, DC, and have enormous energy. The Union Pacific, which was built because of your tireless efforts in fundraising and coaxing (and sometimes lying), was the longer of the two parts of the transcontinental railroad. You had the good sense to hire Grenville Dodge to be the chief construction engineer for the UPRR.

You gave stock in the construction company for the railroad to Congressmen to “thank” them for their support in passing funding legislation. You persuaded many investors to buy stock in the railroad. As fast as money came in, you spent it. When the sections of railroad already built started earning money, you paid the investors handsome dividends to keep them happy, and promised the workers that they would get paid. More investors kept buying stock, and you kept the money flowing. In order to get more government loans, you pressured the builders build faster, faster, faster. The more miles they built, the more land the government gave the railroad, and the more loans the government paid to help construction.

You promised Brigham Young and his Mormon workers whatever they demanded as wages in order to get them to build the railroad, even when you did not have the money to pay. Then, you arranged to pay them in equipment and supplies left over after the railroad was built. They got they wanted – a railroad line linking to the transcontinental line – and you got the main line built.

On May 6, 1869, your railroad car was held up by workers demanding their wages. They had not been paid in months. They refused to let you go to the ceremony in Promontory Summit, Utah, until they were paid. You used your considerable powers of persuasion to raise \$253,000 in cash by telegraphing friends, and paid the workers enough to secure your release.

Without your efforts, it would have taken a much longer time to build the Union Pacific. The country has its railroad, and you made it happen, and happen fast.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

General William Tecumseh Sherman on behalf of the United States Army

You are the famous Civil War general who led the March through Georgia, using “total war” tactics to demoralize and defeat the Confederacy. During the Civil War you became aware of the engineering skills and competence of Grenville Dodge. He earned your respect and friendship, and you have done all you could to promote his career and his next great project, the transcontinental railroad.

After the Civil War, you were sent by the United States government to fight the Indian Wars on the Great Plains. You have many Civil War veterans in your regiments. Some of the soldiers are African-Americans, who are nicknamed “Buffalo Soldiers” by the Indians because their hair is dark and curly, reminding the Indians of the shaggy hair on the head and neck of the bison.

Building forts, moving an army from place to place, and protecting outlying settlements is a hard job on the Great Plains. Wood and other materials have to be brought from great distances. Often, the army cannot arrive at a trouble spot quickly enough to prevent disaster. You have been convinced from the beginning that a railroad is the best, the only, way to gain mastery of the region. The army must be moved and re-supplied swiftly. The railroad, and its accompanying telegraph line, is the key to this. You are convinced that the future wellbeing of the nation depends on establishing order over the vast interior part of the continent.

You have been informing the Indians with whom you negotiate that they must give up their hunting and raiding way of life. If they change their way of life and agree to live peacefully alongside the settlers, they deserve protection like everyone else. If they do not, you will deal ruthlessly with them. You have been using your troops to protect the railroad construction workers and the settlers moving onto the Great Plains. Without your protection, it is doubtful that the construction crews would have been able to complete this vital project.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

General Grenville Dodge, chief engineer and surveyor for the Union Pacific

You are an engineering genius. You are finest designer/planner of railroads in the United States, and probably in the world. You have been working on railroads since you began as a surveyor at the age of fourteen. In 1859 Abraham Lincoln asked you for your advice about the best route along which to build a transcontinental railroad. At the time he was running for president, and thinking ahead about the needs of the nation. You advised Abraham Lincoln to start the track in Council Bluffs, near Omaha, Nebraska, and follow a route through the Platte River valley. President Lincoln later signed your recommendations into law, and construction began in 1863. Your advice to the President, that a railroad was possible, necessary and which route across the Great Plains was the best, was firm and clear. Abraham Lincoln, a man who was quick to recognize talent, questioned you closely and heeded your advice.

During the Civil War, you were begged to leave the Union Army to go lead the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad. You refused. You saw it as your duty to serve the nation during wartime, and you were put in charge of numerous vital projects, building railroads, bridges and other structures for the war effort. General W.T. Sherman learned to trust your skill; you have earned his friendship and undying respect.

Once the war ended, you left immediately to join in building the transcontinental railroad. Its completion will be your greatest lifetime achievement. Every decision you make is for the good of the railroad. You are committed to quality in construction. When Doc Durant tries to insist on saving money by using cheaper or faulty materials, you insist that a certain level of quality has to be maintained, while allowing certain cost-saving shortcuts

(like treated cottonwood ties that will need to be replaced after three years) in the interests of speeding the pace of construction. Every good decision about route and construction of the Union Pacific, shows your influence.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

The Casement brothers, Jack and Dan, heads of construction for the Union Pacific

You were both generals during the Civil War, and used your skills at organizing people and moving supplies to keep tons of materials every day flowing to the railroad construction crews, and to keep the construction moving forward. You organized the construction of the railroad with the efficiency of a military campaign. The end of track, where the rails gave out, was the point of advance. Everything had to be organized to move that point forward as rapidly as possible. You kept the track under construction at a pace as fast as a man could walk. On extraordinary days, your crews laid more than four miles of track per day. In order to give your workers an incentive, in 1866 you began offering workers a pound of fresh tobacco for each day during which a mile or more of track was laid. On days when two miles were laid, you offered workers time-and-a-half pay (an extra 50% of pay for the day). These incentives kept your railroad construction moving fast.

In order to accomplish this extraordinary rate of construction, the workers in teams had to build a grade (a level built up for the track), lay the wooden ties across it sideways, spike the thirty-foot long rails down to the ties in parallel lines exactly four feet and eight-and-a-half inches apart, and fill ballast in the gaps. Two rails were laid every thirty seconds, one on each side, four rails to a minute. Nothing like it had ever been done before on such a huge scale. Your railroad, the Union Pacific, was in competition with the Central Pacific to try to lay the most track and get the most land and money in loans from the government. During the early years, your crews had to work with guns nearby, ready to fight off an Indian attack.

The pressure on you both, day after day, was intense. The railroad owners wanted you to build faster, faster. You needed to keep the supplies flowing to the front of the track, tons per day, on six miles of trains, constantly moving. If anything went wrong, you were blamed. You had to keep the workers from striking or slowing down, even when they had not been paid for months. Your crews worked in rainstorms, and into the winter, blasting the ground apart in frozen chunks to lay the grade. You kept at the work, year after year, for six long years until the job was done. You want the world to know that building the railroad would have been impossible without the discipline and organizational skill, the bold courage, of Civil War veterans. Most of the men working on the Union Pacific were Civil War veterans like you.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Telegraph operators

As the railroad has been built, the telegraph has been built alongside it, strung from tall poles. Without the telegraph, the railroad could not have been built. You are the people who have spent all day, every day, communicating along the line so that supplies are moved forward to the front of construction. You have to tap out the messages accurately in Morse Code to communicate with suppliers, to tell how many rails are needed, how many spikes, pickaxes, shovels, carts, and everything else. Without the messages you tap out, the workers would not get fresh food. When Indians attack, you tap out the message that calls for help from the Army. When bison scratch their backs on the telegraph poles, and the poles topple over, everyone is reminded how important your telegraph is. Until the line is restrung, messages cannot move swiftly across the Great Plains. Any reporter sending his story to the newspaper about the finishing of the railroad and the driving of the Golden Spike will have to depend on you to tap out his 500 words. You should be in the story!

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

George Booth, engineer of the locomotive Jupiter, for all the locomotive crews
You can't build a railroad, or operate it, without trains. From the beginning, you engineers and train crews have been moving the freight and equipment to build the railroad along the tracks as they are built, hundreds of tons every day on long strings of cars. The locomotives use steam power, and are sensitive and complicated to operate. The firebox must be kept heated just right with fuel so that the water boils and the steam pressure moves the engine. It is your crew's job to keep the expensive locomotive engine from overheating and cracking or exploding. You need to understand every piece of equipment on your engine, and how to adjust it. You need to plan so that you always have enough water and fuel to keep running. You are responsible for passenger safety. If the track is washed out, or a tree falls across it, or a herd of bison or cattle stand in the way, you have to stop the train before the train crashes and derails. You are constantly on the alert. Engineers are often killed in accidents, because they steer the front of the train, which is moving fast. You and your crew will keep the railroad running, and the world should not overlook your contribution.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Lee Chew, for the Chinese workers on the Central Pacific Railroad

You “Celestials” (China was called the “Celestial Kingdom”) did the hardest and most dangerous work of all to get this railroad built. More than 7000 of you were hired to build the CPRR, and more than 1200 of you died, more than any other group. It was Chinese workers who tunneled through the Sierra Nevada, who built the trestles that took trains across gorges hundreds of feet deep, and who covered the track with many miles of shed roofing to keep it clear of winter snows.

At the start of the railroad construction, many Chinese men were already in California. They had come there hoping to earn enough money to help their families in China. In California, the Chinese encountered brutal racism. They were attacked, beaten up, driven off if they found a good place to dig for gold, not allowed to become citizens, not allowed to attend school, not allowed to testify in court, ridiculed and insulted. The Chinese were required to pay many extra taxes not charged to other Californians. A humiliation was for a harasser to cut off a Chinese man’s long braid of hair, or queue, as an insult to his culture and his manhood. Typical phrases included in a Chinese to English phrasebook from 1867 are: “You must not strike me”, “He does not intend to pay me my wages”, “He claimed my mine”, “He assaulted me”, “The man struck the Chinese boy on the head”, and “He was frozen to death in the snow.” Their lives were so hard that a saying developed, “Not a Chinaman’s chance”, meaning that the situation was hopeless.

When James Strobridge started to hire Chinese workers, he quickly discovered that they were excellent team workers, hard working, clean, precise and reliable. Chinese workers stayed on the job, worked hard, and accepted lower wages (\$1 per day) than other workers (because they were discriminated against for most jobs and had to take what they could get!). The Chinese workers lived crowded together in tent shelters, and rapidly organized themselves into groups to keep their sleeping areas clean and orderly. One of their work requirements was food that was fresh and prepared by their own cooks. Therefore, the Central Pacific transported to the construction site fresh vegetables from California and a wide variety of seafood, meat, noodles, rice and other Chinese foods. The Chinese ate more nutritious meals, and better cooked, than anyone else on Central or Union Pacific Railroads.

Within a few months, more than five thousand Chinese workers were building the CPRR (Central Pacific Railroad). When more workers were needed, more were recruited in China and brought over by ship. Their skill in using the dangerous explosives black powder (which the Chinese had invented), and nitroglycerine, made it possible for the CP to blast cuts and long tunnels through the Sierra Nevada granite, working around the clock in three shifts every twenty-four hours. Thousands of Chinese railroad workers died in snow slides, landslides and explosions.

The Chinese accomplished a marvel of railroad construction. The Summit Tunnel alone was 7,024 feet above sea level in the Sierra Nevada, and was blasted so accurately that the halves of the tunnel met in the middle to within two inches of matching up perfectly. All the work was done by hand. Of all the Big Four investors for whom you built the railroad, only Charlie Crocker ever publicly praised or thanked your group for all you accomplished. Now you want to be thanked publicly, for all the world to hear.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

“Patrick O’Rourke”, speaking for the Irish workers on the Union Pacific Railroad

Your group was by far the most numerous building the UPRR. You were recruited in Ireland, and came to the United States by the thousands to work on the railroad. There were not enough workers already in the United States were willing to do such backbreaking work, and the railroad builders were in a hurry. So they brought you over.

You lived in one of the bunk cars (converted box cars), along with seventy-seven others in bunks. You workers were paid \$2.50 to \$4.00 each day, depending on the work, and had to pay \$5 per week for room and board. Irish-Americans were usually the ones hired to supervise teams of workers, as well as to do the spiking, grading, track laying and so on; very precise work. You learned your jobs quickly, and were immensely strong and tough workers. You worked hard, played hard, and many of you drank hard off duty. From time to time you got into fights. You also read, wrote and sang songs, and told stories. You suffered many accidents when hands got bashed by sledgehammers, and when explosions detonated too soon as cuts were being blasted in hillsides and through the Rocky Mountains.

When the CPRR reached Utah, your team was laying track near the Chinese team of the CPRR. Congress had not yet specified where the tracks were to meet, and both sides wanted to make more money by building more track. In order to slow the CPRR builders down, Irish workers attacked and fought with the Chinese workers. When the Chinese fought back, the Irish planted explosives that killed several Chinese workers. The fighting and sabotage did not stop until the Chinese set off explosives nearby that buried several Irish workers alive in a cascade of dirt and rocks.

Now the track is completed. You are proud of what you were able to accomplish, and have exciting stories to tell. You plan to stay in the United States and make your home here. You want the world to know that the Irish made this railroad possible – who else would have done such good work in so short a time under such appalling conditions?

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Jack Ellison (and if an extra is needed, “John Henry”), speaking for Freedmen workers on the Union Pacific Railroad (John Henry, the “steel-driving” man of railroad legend and song, worked on a later railroad, and died in the effort to keep up with the pace of new machine technology. The name was borrowed for this simulation.) There are about three hundred of you who have been working on the transcontinental railroad, and you have accomplished something important. You have proved to the nation that former slaves have the initiative, the perseverance, the sheer grit, to work as hard and skillfully as people who have been free all their lives. You have worked alongside Irish workers, alongside immigrants from other countries, and have been a vital part of the construction teams. You got to know them and they got to know you. You have suffered from the heat and cold and dust, from the long hours and hard living conditions. With all the other workers you have gone months at a time without being paid, and kept on working. You have done the hardest jobs, dealt with insults, held your own and earned everyone’s respect. You are proud of your accomplishments. You took the job because you wanted the work, you wanted to get away from where your family once lived in slavery, you wanted to see the country, you wanted an adventure, and you had something to prove.

This railroad will tie together the whole nation. It will open up opportunities in far places for you and the ones you love. It will open up communities in the West where you may decide to become a homesteader, and have land of your own. Working on this railroad has been the beginning of a new life for you. You want the world to know that you, too, are an American citizen and have played a big part in growing this nation – during slavery, and now in freedom.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Brigham Young, leader of the Mormons (Church of Latter Day Saints) and Mormon railroad workers

Brigham Young, you are the charismatic second leader of the Mormons, who led your followers out across the Great Plains to the Utah territory, where they founded Salt Lake City. When Joseph Smith was murdered, you took over the huge organizational and religious challenge of leading the Mormons, and of helping them find a place where they could create a godly society on earth according to their beliefs. Under your leadership, the Mormons have prospered and Salt Lake City has become the only major white settlement between the Mississippi River and California along the route taken by the railroad.

Your Mormon workers have been vital to the completion of the railroad, particularly to the Union Pacific branch. They are hardworking, sober (they don't drink alcohol and are never hung over) and honest. They avoid the rowdies in Hell on Wheels. They are excellent at teamwork. They will faithfully carry out any work agreement to which you have committed them and for which they have signed a work contract. When there were not enough reliable Irish and freedmen workers available, the Mormons undertook to help complete the job for the Union Pacific. It was, in your view, an act of God which sent a plague of grasshoppers in 1868. The grasshoppers by the millions ate up the Mormon crops and left many men free (and needing money) to go work on the railroad. For you, Brigham Young, and your fellow Mormons, the construction of the railroad will mean that you are able to communicate easily once again with friends and family far away. You will be able to send out missionaries more easily, bring more of the faithful to Utah, and expand trade for your farm products. You were disappointed that this first railroad line will not go right through Salt Lake City, but you have accepted the judgment of the surveyors as to the best route for the track. Since the Union Pacific owners are having difficulty finding enough money to pay your workers, you will agree to accept payment in leftover equipment and supplies (rails, spikes, ties, etc.) With these materials, you and your workers will complete a spur line to Salt Lake City within a year, linking you to the main line.

Without Brigham Young's leadership and remarkable organizational abilities, and the skill and heroic efforts of the Mormons, it would have been impossible for the Union Pacific part of the line to be completed so swiftly or so well. You want the world to know of and respect your contributions. Perhaps this will help overcome some of the religious and lifestyle prejudices against your people.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Anna Judah, wife of Theodore Judah, surveyor of the route taken by the Central Pacific railroad

The Central Pacific railroad was your husband's idea. In his surveying and mapmaking explorations of the Sierra Nevada, he found the mountain pass which made it possible to cross the Sierra by going across (and through) one ridge instead of two. Theodore Judah spent years exploring the mountains and surveying the best places to put the track of a railroad, so that it would be able to move through the mountains along a gradient not too steep or dangerous. His precise maps guided the railroad builders.

Your husband was a visionary who became convinced that the railroad was possible and necessary to unite the huge United States from coast to coast. He dedicated his life to convincing politicians (and the Big Four) in California and Washington to pass the laws needed to start the project. He knew that only with government aid could the resources be raised to pay for such a huge project.

Theodore Judah died before the project was completed. You helped him in his efforts to lobby Congress, to explore and survey the mountains. You believe that his spirit is hovering over this great event. You know that without Theodore Judah's persistence and dedication, this day would never have come to pass. You want to make sure that his contribution is not forgotten.

Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Spotted Tail, Lakota warrior, speaking for Plains Indians displaced by the railroad

These prairies, and the bison who roam them still in herds numbering tens of millions, are vital to your way of life. You have been fighting for ten years to keep control of the Great Plains, and you are worried. Already you can tell that the bison herds are being unsettled by the railroad. The bison do not like crossing the raised grade of gravel and sand on which the ties and track rest. The bison have been shot in large numbers (by people like “Buffalo Bill” Cody) to feed the construction crews. Railroad travelers using the track already completed have started shooting the bison from the train windows, just for sport. The herds are being shot for skins and tongues, and their bodies are left to rot where they lie. Where the railroad track has gone, already settlers are moving in and building towns, plowing up the prairie, bringing in herds of cattle, driving your people and the bison further away. No wonder you attacked the railroad construction crews, and tried to drive them away. You want all these people out of your territory.

You are proud of your nomadic, hunting way of life. It has made your people strong and skillful and kept you healthy. The United States government has repeatedly made treaties with your leaders promising to keep settlers off your lands and has repeatedly broken these treaties. When settlers do not obey the treaties and move into Indian Territory, the government soldiers protect the settlers. Sometimes they attack and kill peaceful Indians who did not disturb the peace. They punish some Indians for attacks committed by different Indians. It is not fair.

You were not asked for permission, or offered any payment for the use of the land on which the railroad was built, and it is destroying your way of life. You hope that the reporter(s) will tell your story and concerns to the people in the cities. Tell them to leave the Great Plains alone. Tell them to stay away from the bison and stay in their cities. Tell them to let you live your lives.

NOTE: There are no buffalo in North America, but this has long been the name given to Bison. Where historically appropriate for a name, I have kept Buffalo in place, but have used the word Bison to denote the large plains mammal.

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(Please review this section for content and decide if it is grade/age appropriate for your class!)

Tavern Keepers, “soiled doves”, gamblers, preachers and bookstore owners in Hell on Wheels (pick your role from this list, and create a name for yourself)

You speak as a representative for all those who work in the traveling town (nicknamed “Hell on Wheels”) near the construction front of the Union Pacific railroad. The town is thrown together from flimsy materials, and many tents. Every week or so the town relocates as the railroad construction moves rapidly forward. The workers use the traveling town for recreation, as an escape from the hard conditions of work on the railroad. The railroad workers have their own dormitory and dining hall railroad cars, but often turn to Hell on Wheels to let off steam, to buy a book or a drink or the comfort of a woman’s company, or to hear a sermon. Your town is rough, but you are convinced that your services are necessary and in demand by the railroad workers – or the town would not exist! Yes, there is an average of one murder per day in Hell on Wheels, often over gambling. Yes, the construction bosses wish you would all go away and leave the workers to sober up. However, you argue that the workers are only human. The prairies are wide and lonely, bitterly cold in the winter, blistering hot in the summer, dusty and windy at any time of the year. The work is dangerous. No wonder the men seek comfort. You want Hell on Wheels to be part of the story of the transcontinental railroad and its construction. Your town will fold and go away in a few days when the railroad is all built – but you don’t think it should be forgotten or overlooked!

Bibliography:

Ambrose, Stephen E.; *Nothing Like it in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863-1869*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

Simulation courtesy of Andrea Volckmar, DeWitt Middle School, Ithaca City School District